FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER'S

COURSE IN PRAYER

by Francis Merchant

LESSON 2

Published by Fellowship in Prayer, Inc.

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FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER, 200 E. 36 St., New York, N.Y. 10016

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THE SUBJECTIVE EMPHASIS: THE VERTICAL APPROACH

Man is a symbol in search of its meaning. This is part of his dilemma. Surrounded by mysteries, he has comparatively little certain knowledge; in large part he must grope his way by insight and faith. Many voices appeal to him, each pulling him in a different direction. The religionist is inclined to prescribe unshakable faith, whereas the scientist counsels caution until all the facts are known. Faith, however, is a garment of many hues, and a man may die long before a thimbleful of directional facts has been gathered. Votaries of pleasure are not wanting who hold that all speculation concerning man and his place in the universe is useless—and that it is best to spend the fleeting hours in pursuit of tangible satisfactions and pleasures. In only too many cases people are content to live from day to day, content to follow the daily routine and to act within the narrow circle of their limitations. They seem satisfied to imitate others, conforming readily to mass trends. The changing fashions of the day serve as their guide. Then, too, men and women of competence and capacity devote themselves to the accumulation of wealth or to the pursuit of power—and only a crisis will make them ponder the ultimate purpose for which they engage in these activities. For those who are content to rest in scepticism, the comment of Hafiz might be appropriate: "Any object of adoration is better than self-worship."

Each individual is called upon to decide which way he will go, but no one is equipped with full knowledge in making choices. The accumulated knowledge of science is fractional. One-third of each day man spends in sleep, so that he is unconscious for a large part of his stay on earth. Again, he is unaware of what others are thinking, and therefore finds it difficult to form judgments about them. As to the nature of the universe in which the earth is but a very small part, our knowledge is exceedingly fragmentary. And yet, in spite of these drawbacks, we must make

decisions; we must arrive at conclusions; we must find our direction. It should be remembered that no conclusion is also a conclusion, albeit a negative one.

In these circumstances it is by no means easy to find one's way, and we can deeply sympathize with those who move frustratedly in blind alleys. Fortunately, man is not left without resources. He is gifted with the power of thought, the pondering mind, and the discriminating heart.

What has man done with his mind? Scientists have reshaped the world; inventors have produced innumerable machines that replace manual labor; businessmen have created a network of trade that stretches around the earth. These achievements in large measure concern outer progress. They are, to be sure, very encouraging, but they represent but a partial accomplishment. Inner progress is a somewhat different matter. The quality of human beings has not changed as significantly as the outside world. This realization is often expressed in the thought that human nature, considered as a whole, does not change. Many specific examples could be adduced to prove that sinners have become saints, and thieves, honest citizens. En masse, however, the improvement of human beings has been distressingly slow, and yet, is it not more important that they become wiser than that the world about us be altered for the better by discoveries and inventions? This problem overshadows all others. The destiny of the human race depends upon the improvement of the quality of man's consciousness. There is a direct correlation between our failure to give priority to this problem and the high incidence of mental illness in our society.

Our chief concern, then, is inner progress. The success of any civilization, we contend, may be measured by the kind of human being it produces. Material prosperity, however desirable, is a secondary matter. Improving the conditions of life is indeed commendable, but improving human beings is even more important. The best civilization cannot survive if mean-spirited and morally bankrupt citizens arrogate power to themselves.

How, then, shall we undertake the great task of improving human beings? The first step involves a change of focus from

the outer to the inner, from the objective to the subjective, from the domain of things to that of ideas. The Greek injunction, Know thyself, is an invitation to look within. As we turn our gaze inward, however, certain dangers confront us. Lurking in the subconscious are many tendencies that are repugnant to the discriminating mind. The psychoanalysts have wallowed in this twilight realm, in many cases never moving beyond it. A look into this disagreeable area should serve the useful purpose of sensitizing conscience, of making the individual more keenly aware of the opposing forces in his nature. If a man is displeased by what he observes in himself, he should try to reshape himself in a nobler image. In a sense, this is the meaning of repentance.

Beyond the negative elements lies the greatness that slumbers in every man. The potentiality is there, but it must be awakened. Sometimes a crisis has this effect. The concentration camp experiences of World War II produced evidence that should have altered our psychology textbooks. Human beings who were subjected to the utmost degree of brutality did not necessarily revert to animal behavior. In fact, many instances of great heroism are reported. Some prisoners, despite the dire conditions of life, performed acts of exemplary self-sacrifice. In studying the records, one cannot help feeling that there is a hidden greatness and splendor in man which, in ordinary circumstances, may never become manifest.

The calling forth of that hidden greatness is the central purpose of this course. As we turn our gaze inward, however, we must be prepared to perceive certain negative elements and to engage in the struggle to eliminate them. Saint Paul may have had this inner battle in mind when he counseled his readers to "fight the good fight." Out of such struggle the greatestgood emerges. In this internal war, prayer is a weapon that is available to everyone who cares to use it.

The subjecti ve orientation is recommended by world religions. "The kingdom of heaven is within you," we are told, an implication that the inner search is of transcendant importance. Within the heart, say the Hindu scriptures, is atma, the spirit of the universe.

A subjective emphasis is suggested by a common symbol, the cross. It consists of two components—a vertical and a horizontal element. The vertical piece stands on the earth and points upward to the heavens. It represents man's relationship to the Highest. The horizontal arm is parallel to the earth and signifies man's relation to his fellow man. It is interesting to note that the horizontal component cannot stand by itself, but the vertical can. This upward-pointing component symbolizes the link between earth and heaven, between the concrete and the abstract, between the personality and the soul, between man and God. It suggests an upward movement from effect to cause, from the emanated form to the emanating source. The objective manifestation is thus related to the subjective purpose from which it was generated.

When a man turns inward, he seeks the causative source of his life manifestation. This involves a relationship with the highest part of himself. The emanated substance seeks to discover the purpose of the emanating source and to make the objective form fulfill the subjective intention. The means to achieve this end concern aspiration, meditation, prayer, and invocation. Words frequently tend to becloud the central issue, and theologians have been hard put to define their terms. Instead of referring to the more conventional phrase of man's relation to God, we might just as well speak of his relation to the causative factor, the source, the evolutionary drive, the generating will, or the form-producing essence.

Know thyself, then, should not only involve a knowledge of negative personality traits but also of the higher reaches of the purposive self. It is a creative relationship that is sought between the outward expression and the inner originating source. The self we know is but a partial manifestation of the self we do not know. Communication between the two attunes the instrument to its creator.

How can this desirable relationship be achieved? This is the problem that has exercised thoughtful men and women in all ages. It is the consensus that the quest is difficult but most rewarding. Of all the activities in which a man may engage during his lifetime, this is one of the most meaningful.

Techniques

The means whereby a man may become acquainted with his spiritual self are varied. World religions suggest a number of interesting techniques. The admonition of the Christian is to love God. The Hindu scriptures counsel the seeker to renounce the fruits of action, dedicating all he does to the Highest; or again, to rise in consciousness by meditation. A mystic counsels us to beat upon the cloud of unknowing that separates us from God by ardent prayer. Brother Lawrence, performing humdrum duties in the kitchen, sought to practice the presence of God. Shankaracharya advised his followers to assert again and again their identity with the divine flame of which they are the sparks. The Sufi seeks by intense devotion to achieve union with the Godhead within.

All these methods are helpful in climbing the mountain of perfection. They remind us that striving souls have for many centuries faced the same task which confronts us. As they found the way that leads from darkness to light, so may we.

For our purposes, let us consider the problem of our vertical relation to the Highest in terms of aspiration, meditation, imagery, and prayer.

We seek to develop a practical program of meaningful exercises rather than excite elevated feelings that are undependable and often evanescent. Just as the mind is filled little by little with knowledge, so must we proceed methodically to refine our spiritual sensitivity. Our purpose is to establish a life rhythm—an achievement all by itself.

Aspiration

"An aspiration," wrote R. L. Stevenson, "is a joy forever." Just as education depends on a continuing desire for knowledge, so the development of the inner life depends on persistent aspiration. Fire is a symbol of this upward-tending impulsion. Each day a person should symbolically light a candle within his heart as a token of his directional striving. Schools encourage the will to know, and well they should, but far less is done to nourish the will to aspire.

Accumulation is quite different from aspiration. The busi-

nessman accumulates money; the academician, facts; the scientist, knowledge of nature. Aspiration is a flaming process that burns away the walls that separate a man from the ideal toward which he strives. It is the process that brings together seeker and sought, actual and ideal. The many are thus resolved into one, and the outer is fused with the inner. For the mystic, aspiration is a means of approach to God.

Three elements are distinguishable: the person who aspires, the object of his aspiration, and the process he employs. In terms of our discussion, the individual aspires toward his causative source and uses prayer as the process. Standing at the foot of the cross, he looks upward and seeks to be at-one with the highest point; and the leap from lowest to highest is accomplished by prayer.

An Eastern sage urged his disciples to repeat again and again, "I am the Eternal." At first glance, this seems to be a contradiction, for it is a well-known fact that men are mortal and that the body perishes. Here today and gone tomorrow is the plight of man through the ages. However, the Eastern sage believed that the essence of man is eternal and sought to identify himself with this portion of the self. The projection of that essence in time and space is ephemeral, but that which caused the time-space manifestation is not subject to decay. The body, we may speculate, is the lowest part of the vertical component of the cross, subject to time, change, and death. The causative factor may be regarded as the topmost point of the vertical element, untouched by temporal concerns, separate from the physical tenement it briefly informs. In theological terms, this is the "father in heaven" who manifests on earth through the son.

The purpose of prayer is here indicated. That which is transient and temporal seeks to be united with that essence which is eternal. This involves a new sense of identity, a shift of focus from the unreal to the real, from the changeable to the undying, from the smallness of the personality to the largeness of the soul.

Aspiration, then, is a generator of the light that defines the path and the fire that burns all to unity.

Meditation

Rest and quiet are often prescribed by doctors for persons whose nerves are jangled by the hurly-burly of everyday living. The nourishing properties of silence have thus been clearly acknowledged. However, there is no need to wait for a jarring crisis before we seek silence. Each day we may set aside a brief period during which we can enjoy the benefits that healing quiet confers. Such an atmosphere of silence promotes meditation. It is directly related to reflection and communion.

As it is difficult to hear a whisper amid noise, so it is difficult to make out what the voice of reason has to say to us during moments of emotional disturbance and clamorous self-assertion.

All discussion involves alternate articulation and listening, that is, speaking and quietly attending to what is said to us. Such listening is akin to meditation, for it requires receptivity to impinging stimuli.

The world addresses us in non-verbal language. The flowers speak to us in spring, and the stars converse at night, but they use an alphabet quite different from the one to which we are accustomed. We should try to become responsive to these languages, and above all, to the delicate speech of the soul. It is unfortunately true that many people respond more readily to the insistent voice of pain, paying a little more attention to a toothache than to the whispers of the inner self.

If prayer may be likened to elevated speech, meditation may be compared to earnest listening. The meditator seeks a place of quiet and then tries to match the outer silence with inner peace. He stills the emotions, for he does not wish to be influenced by moods, and he stills the calculating mind, for he seeks to communicate with the higher part of his consciousness. At this point there is a danger of lapsing into a kind of quietism, but the use of the creative imagination can avert this condition. It should be remembered that the meditator seeks to be impressed by a subjective source, and that the registration of such an impression is an exercise in subtle reception. Standing upon an imagined mountain peak, the meditator may visualize the sun

emerging from clouds and shining upon him. Or again, he may hold up an empty silver vase and imagine the waters of life pouring into it. These acts of the creative imagination may serve to help the individual ascend beyond that which is the present reality to the domain of the envisioned ideal.

Imagery

Vivid images are to be found in world religions. The Holy Grail is a well known symbol, and so is the Rock of Ages. "Be ye lamps unto yourselves," the Buddha admonished his disciples. The East has a saying that the shining dewdrop slips into the sea—meaning that the individual unit merges into the universal consciousness.

Such images can be enriching. They provide themes for extended meditations. The searching mind can find many additional examples. The river that ever flows toward the sea suggests a movement from the individual to the universal. The dawn is the revelation accorded when light shines into the precincts of darkness. The moon reflects the light of the sun as the personality should reflect the light of the soul. Within the pitchblende the scientist finds the precious radium, just as the seeker finds the spiritual essence within the prosaic personality life. The transformation of the crawling caterpillar into the flying butterfly points to the reshaping of man in his spiritual image.

The Psalmist writes, "Thou preparest a table before me," but leaves us the task of visualizing the symbolical food placed thereon. "Give us this day our daily bread" is not simply a prayer for sandwiches and muffins, but rather for that which nourishes the spirit. Each person would do well to hold out his empty cup daily, metaphorically speaking, so that it might be filled with the waters of life.

Images can thus be effectively used in meditation and prayer to link the intangible world with the tangible.

Prayer and the Vertical Relationship

A fountain sends forth a stream of glistening water into the air. A persistent upward pressure, generated by the fact that the source is located at a higher altitude than the point of emission,

drives it skyward. There is symbolism concealed in this physical phenomenon. Prayer should rise like a fountain from man to the source of his being. A channel can thus be built between the outer person and the inner self.

An immediate good derivable from such prayer may be expressed as wholeness. The outer desire is harmonized with the inner intention. "Thy will be done" is an expression of a willingness to allow the prescriptions of the higher self to supersede the preferences of the personality. In a sense, it is the subordination of the self to the soul. The warring elements of the personality are thus harmonized by making them responsive to a higher will.

Thus, a direct result of the vertical relationship established by prayer is wholeness of personality. This manifests as a greater sense of purpose and a subduing of the warring elements that pull in different directions. "Thy will be done" is a model prayer that produces this effect .

Another result of inward-directed prayer is guidance. Again and again we stand at the crossroads, and the problem is in which direction we should move. The East provides us with a prayer in this connection, namely, "Lead us from darkness to light." This is a generalized statement that has many applications. Our task is always to move toward the light—to go from ignorance to knowledge, from that which is to that which ought to be.

Wholeness and guidance, then, are two general results that arise from prayer that emphasizes the vertical relationship of man to God.

ASSIGNMENT

1. *Optional.* Any comments you may have concerning this lesson would be appreciated.

2. *Experiment.* Practice meditation and prayer for at least half

an hour each day. Choose one of the following themes: a) Thy will be done, b) Lead us from darkness to light, c) I am the Eternal, d) I place an empty vase upon the altar that it might be filled with the waters of life.

3. *Stretching the Imagination.* Test the value of constant repetition so that the key thought becomes an integral part of you: I send a filament composed of lighted thought to the highest part of myself.

4. *Sharing.* (Encounter with Prayer). Please share realizations and results flowing from this work.

5. *A Suggested Form for Prayer and Meditation* (alter to suit your needs):

Stage 1: Affirmation: I am the Eternal.
Stage 2: Dedication: I seek to fulfill the cause for which I came into this world.
Stage 3: Reflection: Make me an instrument of light.
Stage 4: Prayer: (Repetition). Formulate a prayer that has special meaning for you—for example, "Make Thy face to shine upon me."

When you have completed the above assignment, you are invited to send it to The Editor, Fellowship in Prayer, Room 10-E, 200 East 36 Street, New York, N.Y. 10016. All replies will be confidential.